

Bin Laden's Death and the War on Terrorism

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Almost ten years after the terrorist attacks of September 11th, 2001, Osama Bin Laden, the man most identified with planning and executing those attacks was killed by U.S. forces and buried at sea. The news of Bin Laden's death was greeted in the U.S. by celebrations and a burst of patriotic feeling by many.

The celebrations of Bin Laden's death have been [described by some as potentially contributing to greater anti-American sentiment](#), or even further acts of terrorism against. While this is a possibility the U.S. It seems unlikely that Bin Laden's death, or the American reaction to it, will inspire a rash of anti-American feeling. Those who find American celebration of the death Bin Laden unseemly or who are driven into paroxysms of anti-American hatred because the U.S. succeeded in tracking down and killing a sworn enemy are probably already pretty far down the Jihadist road anyway.

Americans are not unjustified in celebrating the death of the man behind attacks on their country that killed thousands, but these celebrations still seemed somewhat strange and almost nostalgic. They were reminiscent of the days immediately following September 11th when spontaneous bursts of patriotism were not unusual and when feelings about the terrorist attacks on the U.S. had not become intertwined with feelings about the war in Iraq or even about partisan politics. It was as if Bin Laden's death had somehow brought us all back in time.

Bin Laden's death brought out a strong emotional response from many Americans, but the impact of this event on U.S. security is less clear. Although Bin Laden's death may be an event of global significance which will change the course of the struggle against al Qaeda and Jihadist terror, by 2011 Bin Laden had become something of a marginal figure from the past. He had spent the better part of the last decade hiding in a cave, proving himself something less than the fearless anti-American warrior he had once claimed to be. His death is more notable because justice, or perhaps revenge, has finally been served, but its impact on American security is less clear.

While the quest to find Bin Laden was ultimately successful, the cost for the U.S. in treasure, lives, political capital and goodwill has been enormous and cannot be recovered. The more than nine year quest to capture Bin Laden, as part of a broader anti-American strategy to be sure, has taken brought the U.S. into a number of complex foreign entanglements, at times taken attention away from more immediate priorities and been used to justify a range of policy choices, some of which have proven harmful to the U.S. or of, at best, peripheral relevance to the quest to capture or kill Bin Laden.

There is something of a paradox in the way the war on terror was personalized by the U.S. government and presented as being largely about capturing or killing Bin Laden while at

the same time using the idea of combating terrorism to justify decisions, notably the war in Iraq, which had nothing to do with Osama Bin Laden. This paradox continues after Bin Laden's death. The victory over Bin Laden reiterates that there is cost for attacking the US, and that those who do so will eventually be caught and have to pay for their actions. At the same time Bin Laden's death may complicate the struggle against Jihadist terror, but it certainly does not mean that struggle is over.

With Bin Laden now dead al Qaeda has lost its leader and its ballast, but ironically, the US has lost a similar ballast. Without the goal of capturing Bin Laden as the rationale for policies such as the war in Afghanistan, it will be much harder for the administration to justify these kinds of things to the American people. To a lesser extent, without the threat represented by al Qaeda and Bin Laden as being at the center of global Jihad, the rationale behind much of the war on terror, which is at the core of US national security policy, will also be harder to defend. The U.S. must now create policies which both reflect the reality of the threat as well as how the terror environment and U.S. goals have changed now that Bin Laden is dead.

If the world were a qualitatively safer place without Bin Laden, there would be no conflict here, but victory against terror remains largely an abstraction, putting the US in the unenviable position of having to explain why the struggle against terror must continue despite having achieved the highest goal of the struggle.